

Weekly Devotion for December 28, 2020
Pastor Matthew Woods, Grace Lutheran Church

“The Power of a Loyal Friend”

A commercial has been running this last month from an online dating company. It’s clever. It depicts the devil finding a perfect date, named two zero, two zero, otherwise known as Twenty-Twenty. And they hit it off. Twenty-Twenty romantically feeds the devil hot peppers, having picnics in an empty football stadium, stealing toilet paper, and taking selfies in front of a dumpster fire. At the end of the commercial the two are sitting on a park bench next to a river overlooking a bridge. The devil says, “I just don’t want this year to end” as the end of the world begins with comets streaming to the earth. In a humorous way it captures how many may look at the year we just finished.

The commercial is certainly Superbowl worthy but by then it would be irrelevant. Of course, I’m not sure that the dating site in the long run wants us to believe that finding a date on their site would be a short run ending in disaster. Nor do I believe they want us to associate their dating site with a relationship made in hell.

No one I know of deliberately enters into something hoping to be hurt, ruined, or fail. 2020 was started much like 2021 did. It started in hope and celebrating. Each new year’ eve people gather to celebrate the end of the previous year and the beginning of the next with great anticipation.

Hope is a powerful thing. And sometimes we need someone to help us find it again. We need an encourager to be with us. Enter Ruth. Ruth 1 introduces us to Naomi and Ruth, both widows. Naomi moved to Moab with husband and her two sons. Her husband and two sons died in Moab leaving Naomi with only she and her two daughters-in-law; no children and no grandchildren. Naomi goes back to Bethlehem and sends away one of her daughters-in-law and then attempts to push Ruth away too but Ruth remains loyal to Naomi.

¹⁵“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

¹⁶But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” ¹⁸When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

¹⁹So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”

²⁰“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

²²So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

When Naomi went to Moab with her family she was full of hope—“she went away full”. And then we can hear the anger of a woman with a broken heart—“But the Lord has brought me back empty.” And notice when she returns to Bethlehem she is noticeable different; “This be Naomi?” And finally Naomi herself says, “Don’t call me Naomi, which means “pleasant” call

me Mara which means “bitter.” Naomi however travels with a faithful daughter-in-law who feels the same hurt and pain. She is faithful to her; “where you go, I go; your God will be my God.” What Naomi doesn’t yet realize is that this goes both ways. Where Ruth goes so does Naomi. And this is where the hope begins.

In time Ruth will meet Boaz who takes a shine to Ruth and by the end of the book they are married. And eventually they have children; grandchildren for Naomi. In time Mara is put aside and Naomi, “Pleasant” returns to hold her grandchild in her arms. In chapter 4 something new is happening far from where we meet these two women—new life. ¹⁴ The women in town said to Naomi: “Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! ¹⁵ He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”

¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. ¹⁷ The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Naomi became the great, great, great grandmother of King David.

We can never underestimate the power of a loyal friend. They understand us and willingly put up with our bitterness, and our pleasantness. They remain even when we try to push them away. They are as stubborn as we are. Most importantly they are loyal encouragers. Even in conditions far outside of their control; even when they have no idea what they are doing or how it is going to turn out they are encouraging us simply by hanging in with us. Hope is a powerful thing. Often that hope is instilled in us by one or more special people around us who love us and make sure we are not alone.

As the new year comes to us, we should be reminded that we are not alone. Jesus is with us, loves us, and often works through the very people closest to us to renew our spirits to hope. Just mattering to one person is a powerful way God’s grace can be felt. One person can remind us that we more than matter to Jesus. We are His favorite part of creation. Jesus literally went through hell on His cross to make sure that we have more than a new year to look forward to. And like a good friend He still puts up with a lot from us but has never abandoned us even when sometimes we may have pushed Him away. And so, we hope in His resurrection. His resurrection is timeless and no level of hell can touch it. And the people around us can be a powerful agent of grace. We can never underestimate the power of a loyal friend and what role they may play in God’s direction. I pray that this new year we have good friends who are stubborn enough not to be pushed away; who understand us; love us; patient with us, wise with us, and encourage us to hope in the Lord above all. May the Lord bless you in his next year.

I’m Pastor Woods

And thanks to all of you for being a loyal friend to others.

Blessings on your new year.

John 3:30